The Hundred-Year Christmas

David Morrell

"About Santa Claus?" the young girl asked.

"That's right," the father said. "Now pull your blankets close. It's cold tonight."

"A story about Santa Claus?" the other child, a young boy, Matthew, asked. He snuggled in the other bed.

The father thought about it, nodding. "Yes, he's sometimes known as Father Christmas, and he has a friend named Father Time."

"Who's *he*?" the first child, Sarah, asked. "Who's Father Time?"

"Does he bring presents, too?" Matt asked.

"No, not exactly. Not the kind you'll find beneath the tree tomorrow morning. But he lets us have one special gift."

"What is it?" Sarah asked.

The wind howled past the bedroom window. The snow fell thickly.

"Christmas will be white this year," the father said.

"The present. What's the present?" Matthew said.

"It's something Santa gives us, too. The best gift of them all. At least, that's what the story claims."

"Then tell it. Tell the story," they insisted, both at once.

The snow kept falling.

"What you have to understand is there've been many Santas."

"At one time?"

"No, in a row. First one, and then another, then another. Each was human like ourselves, and each was asked if he would like the job. Each Santa lasts a hundred years, and when his time is up, he has to look for his replacement."

"But what happens to the old one?"

"Christmas Eve of his last year, he has to go away."

"To where?"

"The story tells us. See, where Santa lives isn't marked on any map. Not *this* North Pole. You'd never find it in the Arctic. It's beyond the Arctic, farther north than north, beyond all other places. It's invisible. From outside, you can't see it. But from inside, it's a peaceful valley, beautiful, surrounded by steep hills. Santa has a big, old, pleasant house. A stream flows past it. There are willow trees and maple trees and pine trees. There are rabbits, squirrels, and chipmunks. There are fields of waving grass. The seasons change as ours do. When it's summer here, it's also summer there. And when it's winter here, it's also winter there."

"You mean it's snowing there right now?"

"I bet it is. But what I'm going to tell you isn't happening right now. It happened last year and the year before. It starts on New Year's Eve, the end of Santa's ninety-ninth and the beginning of his hundredth year. He has to look for his replacement. First he also has to say good-bye."

"To who?"

"His good friend Father Time."

"You haven't told us who he is."

"Well, Father Time is special, just as Santa is. Each New Year's Eve, a baby's born. No, not exactly born. He doesn't have a mother or a father. What he does is . . . he appears as if from nowhere. Santa finds him sleeping in a cradle, wearing a diaper. Santa takes care of him. At the start, the child is called the New Year's Baby. Mostly, even as a baby, though, he's known as Father Time."

"That's silly. Babies can't be fathers."

"All the same, that's what he's called. Though Santa has a hundred years, this baby has just *one* year. His whole life lasts only that brief time. He ages very quickly. By the end of January, he's already eight, and by the end of February, he's

sixteen. That's eight years every month. By June, he's forty-eight. And by December, well, he's ninety-six. In fact, the last day of the year, his birthday, he becomes one hundred. Then he has to go."

"To where?"

"The same place Santa has to go. Up the hill. The biggest hill. The one that faces toward the north. No matter what the season, summer, winter, even if there's snow, a path leads toward that hill. A winding path that's brown and narrow, like the kind you find in summer when the grass gets trampled and the earth shows through. No one made it. No one uses it but Father Time each New Year's Eve—and Santa every hundred years. Regardless if the snow stands five feet high, the path is always there. It points the way."

"What's on the other side?"

"Well, that's the strangest part of all. Nobody knows. Not Santa and not Father Time. All they know is when their time is up they have to walk along that path. They have to climb the hill and then go down the other side."

"If I was Santa, I'd explore."

"And so would I. But Santa can't. That breaks the rules. He's not supposed to climb that hill until he has to. When his time is up. Besides, the hill is scary."

"Now you're getting to the good part."

"There's a mist behind the hill. A pure-white mist that hides whatever's waiting there. The mist is high, like clouds on mountains,

and it glows as if a blinding light is at its center. Sometimes, too, it glimmers—and it flashes."

"Gosh, I wouldn't want to go there."

"Nor does Santa. Nor does Father Time. But when their time is up, they have to leave."

"What happens if they don't?"

"I'm not sure *what* would happen. No one's ever disobeyed the rule. Each New Year's Eve, although he doesn't want to, Father Time walks up that hill. And every hundred years—he doesn't want to either—Santa also goes. They're nervous. They're afraid. No matter what, they go."

"I'm sad. Is this a sad part?"

"One of them."

"I hope it doesn't make me cry."

"Then maybe I should stop."

"No, tell the story. Tell the story."

"Well, it starts two New Year's Eves ago—December thirty-first. The sun is setting: brilliant crimson off the knee-deep snow. The sky is clear, the air is cold, and Santa's outside near his house. He wears his warm red coat with the thick, white, fleecy wool at the cuffs and collar and the bottom of his coat. He has his red wool pants, his wide black belt, his high black boots. Of course, his long red tassel cap. He leans against a fence and squints in the sunset toward his reindeer. You remember their names? Dasher, Dancer, Prancer, Vixen. Comet, Cupid, Donder, Blitzen. They worked hard on Christmas. Now they rest, pawing the snow to nibble the grass beneath. The reason Santa squints, though, isn't the sunset glinting off the snow. He's crying. Tears roll from his eyes, trickling down his ruddy cheeks. At first, the tears are warm. But then the cold air changes them. They turn to ice on his long white beard. His eyes ache, and his throat feels tight."

"But why is Santa crying?"

"That's exactly what the reindeer want to know. They frown.

They nuzzle at his beard to cheer him up. He sniffles,

and he pats them, but he stiffens when he hears a sound behind him, from his house. The front door opens—then it closes. Santa hears the steps come toward him, slow and weary, scraping on the snowless path. He shuts his eyes and bites his lip. The steps come nearer, making a different sound as they leave the path and crunch through the snow that leads up to the fence. They echo in the cold. They stop, and in the winter evening's quiet, Santa turns. He wipes his tears and sees an old, old man, much older than your grandpa, old and tall and very thin. It's Father Time. He stoops from age. He has a long white beard."

"Like Santa's?"

"Just as white, but even longer, hanging to his chest. He wears a dark gray robe that droops in folds on his body, dangling to his feet. The hood clings over his forehead, but beneath it Santa sees his wrinkled cheeks and his glowing eyes. The old man holds a scythe."

"What's *that*?"

"A long curved knife on a pole. It once was used for cutting down hay. They call that 'reaping.' Father Time, when he gets old, is sometimes called the Reaper. The Grim Reaper."

"What does he cut down?"

"Well, that's another story. I think I'd better save it for a few more years."

"His eyes glow, and he carries that big knife? I thought this was a sad part, but he's scary."

"It depends on what you're used to. Santa isn't scared. He's crying. He's good friends with Father Time."

"I'm ready." Father Time's voice quivers. "Ready as I'll ever be."

"I hate to see this happen." Santa's chest feels tight. His heart aches.

"It's the rule."

"I understand. But I don't have to like it," Santa says. "Good friend, I'm going to miss you."

"I'll miss *you*. I'm worried. What's beyond the hill? What's waiting in the mist?"

"I've always wondered. All these years, I've watched the other Father Times walk up that hill. I watched the Santa who selected me walk up that hill. I'm still not used to it. Each time I feel more sad. And lonely. Much more lonely."

"There's the baby. He will keep you company."

"He hasn't come yet. Not until you're out of sight, over the hill. But even then, I know in a year he'll have to take his own walk. I'll raise *him* as I raised *you*. But next year I'll be going. Next year my time ends as well."

"Perhaps I'll see you then. Perhaps I could be waiting for you."

"Yes, I'd like that. On the other side."

They face the northern hill. The sun sinks low, now orange instead of crimson, faint instead of brilliant. But the mist beyond the hill grows radiant.

The old men hug each other, weeping.

Father Time says, "I'm afraid."

"I'll walk with you. Till you reach the hill."

They leave the fence, shuffling through the knee-deep snow. They step down on the frozen path. The hill appears to grow as they approach it. With an arm around each other, they walk bravely forward.

Father Time says, "I don't think you ought to come this far. You're not supposed to see what's on the other side. Until you take your own walk."

"Just a few more steps."

But then the path begins its upward slope. The hill looms high above them.

Santa stops. "I love you."

"I love *you*. I still remember how you sang to me when I was young and how you used to take me fishing. Maybe one day . . ."

". . . we'll go fishing once again."

They nod and kiss each other's tear-wet cheeks. As Santa sadly watches, Father Time walks up the hill. The snow lies deep beside the path. The sun turns pink now, almost gone, but there's still light enough for Santa to continue watching as his friend plods upward wearily. The mist glows. Father Time stands outlined at the top, his gray robe stark against the mist, his scythe in profile. Father Time peers down the other side. He turns, afraid, and waves good-bye. Weeping, Santa waves as well. Then Father Time walks toward the mist. First, Santa cannot see his feet and legs. Then Santa cannot see his waist and back. The stooping shoulders and the gray hood disappear. The last thing Santa sees is Father Time's bright curving scythe, the blade held high above his good friend's head.

"And then what?"

"Santa stares up till the sun is gone. The darkness makes him sadder. But he can't wait any longer. Wiping at his tears, he has to walk back to his house. The lights are on. White smoke drifts from the chimney. He goes in and takes off his hat and coat and gloves and boots, putting on his furry slippers. In his red shirt, he walks through the living room. It looks like Grandma's living room—a soft old sofa and a rocking chair before the fireplace, a cat curled on another chair beside a reading lamp. Santa doesn't stop, though. He keeps going toward the bedroom next to his, the one that Father Time used. Santa turns the doorknob, pushing gently, walking in. The room is dark, but faint light creeps in from the living room. He holds his breath and

listens to the silence. In a corner, Santa sees what he expected."

"It's the New Year's Baby!"

"Right. You'd think that Santa would get used to what he finds. Sure, he expects to see the baby, but although each New Year's Eve the baby's always waiting for him, nonetheless he's still surprised. Because the baby is a miracle, and with a miracle, regardless of how many times you see it, you can't quite believe it. Each year, Santa wonders if the miracle will come again, and when it does, he feels a tingle. Santa peers down at the crib. The baby's cute and tiny, curled up, sucking at his thumb, asleep.

"Santa covers him with a blanket. Then he knows he'd better heat the baby's milk. But first he has a more important job to do. On a table, there's an hourglass."

"What's that?"

"Two cones. Like the kind you put a scoop of ice cream in. Except, these cones are made of glass. The narrow ends point toward each other. They're supported in a frame, and one cone's filled with sand. The sand drains from the top cone to the bottom one, and when the bottom one is filled, you turn the bottom to the top and let the sand drain down again. It takes an hour for the sand to drain. That's why the cones are called an hourglass. When clocks and watches hadn't been invented, people used an hourglass to know what time it was. The sand in this glass drains much longer than an hour, though. It drains for one full day. And now the sand has almost reached the bottom. Santa turns the cones, so the sand falls from the top again."

"What happens if he doesn't, if the sand stops draining?"

"Time stops. Everything comes to an end."

"You mean the world?"

"That's right. Ourselves and everything around us."

"Gosh."

"That's Father Time's job. To make sure the cones are turned and the sand keeps draining."

"What if he gets sick?"

"Then Santa does it."

"What if Santa's working? What about at Christmas?"

"That's why Father Time is so important. Santa can't always be there to turn the glass, so he depends on Father Time. We all do. But on New Year's Eve, Father Time is still a baby. Santa turns the glass for him, then tiptoes from the bedroom toward the kitchen. In a while, the baby starts to cry. When Santa comes back with the warm milk in a bottle, he discovers the baby needs his diaper changed."

"Oh, yuck."

"I did the same for you, Matt. One day you'll change diapers, too."

"I still say yuck."

"Then Santa carries the baby to the living room and settles in the rocking chair to feed him. As the fire crackles, Santa thinks about the Father Time who disappeared within the mist beyond the hill. He thinks about the year ahead of him, his last year, when he'll have to find another Santa. But for now he feels exhausted after his hard work at Christmas, and he has to watch the baby, so he shuts his worries from his mind. The baby finishes the bottle. Santa burps him. Don't say yuck, Matt. Then the baby sighs with pleasure, snuggles close to Santa's chest, and, sucking a finger, goes to sleep. The fire's heat relaxes Santa. Stretching out his legs, he tilts back in the rocking chair. The cat comes over, sniffing at the baby, curling under Santa's legs, and as the night's frost makes wild patterns on the window, Santa starts to snore."

"That makes me sleepy, Dad."

"You *should* feel sleepy. Gosh, I didn't realize how late it was. You need your rest. Tomorrow will be busy."

"First, the presents in the morning!"

"Then we'll go to church. A little later, we'll see Grandma."

"Is she feeling better?"

"Quite a bit. She's anxious to see both of you and hear about your presents."

"I hope she likes what we're giving her."

"You bet she will. And Grandpa can't wait to take you sledding. A busy day for sure. I'll see you early."

"But what about the story? Aren't you going to finish it?"

"You said it made you sleepy."

"Just when Santa started snoring. I'm awake now."

"Well, I guess a few more minutes couldn't hurt. I'd better whisper. Mom said not to keep you up late."

"Mom won't mind. I bet she'd like to hear the story, too."

"She's reading it. You're right, though. She won't mind. Tonight is special."

The snow fell harder.

"Santa has a busy January—heating bottles, changing diapers. Every day he bathes the baby. Every night, when the baby cries, Santa holds him in his arms and, rocking, sings to him. By January fifteenth, halfway through the month, the child is out of diapers. He's already four. He's learned to walk, and he starts getting into mischief, pulling dishes out of cupboards, spilling milk."

"I used to do that. Not anymore."

"He pulls the poor cat's tail."

"I never did."

"Yes, Santa has to keep a close watch on that boy, I'll tell you. But then January ends. The boy is eight, and he likes skating, sledding, building snowmen. February rolls around, the midpoint of the month, and Father Time is twelve. He has to start to do his job, to make sure the sand keeps draining. Santa talks to him about the rules—how, if he doesn't turn the glass, then Time will end. The boy gets scared. He's never had a grown-up job. He promises he won't forget; he won't make Santa disappointed. Then the boy gets big enough to help take care of Santa's reindeer, brushing them and picking ice balls from their hoofs and making sure that they have lots of hay. These reindeer are good-natured. Santa lets the boy take rides on them, and Santa lets the boy throw snowballs at him. Everything is like a game for Father Time."

"It sounds like fun."

"Then something awful happens."

"What?"

"One night when Father Time's asleep, Santa tiptoes in to smile at him. As Santa turns to leave, he sees the awful thing."

"The sand!"

"The boy forgot to turn the glass. The moonlight glimmers through the window, toward the time-glass on the table, and the last few grains have almost fallen to the bottom. They drop quickly. You could pinch what's left between two fingers. Then not even that much. Ten grains. Five. The room begins to shudder. Four more seconds, and the world will end. The room will vanish."

"Hurry, Santa!"

"And he does. He scrambles toward the table, lunging at the glass, and as the last small grain of sand slips toward the bottom, Santa flips the glass. Again the sand is where it

should be. At the top. A full cone pouring toward the bottom."

"That was close. If all the sand fell . . . Santa saved us just in time."

"And Santa knows it. Outside, freezing wind claws at the window. In the bedroom, Santa sweats, though. Trembling, he clutches the table, his knees so weak he's afraid he'll fall. His heart pounds. He can't breathe. He turns in anger toward the boy."

"He isn't going to spank him, is he?"

"What would you do?"

"I'd get angry, sure. The boy did something bad. Much worse than bad. But Dad, it's like last summer when you told me not to kick my football in the street. I kicked it anyhow and broke poor Mrs. Murphy's window. That was bad."

"You bet. For sure, Mrs. Murphy thought so."

"What about me? The time you told me not to climb that maple tree in our front yard. You said the branches were too thin. I climbed it anyhow and broke three branches. That was bad. I still feel sorry for the tree."

"You disobeyed. You broke the rules."

"And you were angry."

"I sure was."

"But Dad, you didn't spank me. Oh, you shouted at me, and you scared me. Then you made me earn the money to replace the window."

"And with me, you made me cut the branches into pieces. You made me paint that black stuff on the tree trunk where the branches used to be. You wouldn't let me play outside for three whole days."

"Three days. Three branches. It seemed fitting."

"But you didn't spank me."

"Nor does Santa spank the boy."

"I'm glad."

"He almost wakes up Father Time and shouts at him, but then he realizes he's too angry, so he grits his teeth and leaves the room."

"That's all?"

"Not quite. The night is long. He rocks before the fire, brooding. In the morning, when the boy comes out to eat his breakfast, Santa pours some milk and cereal for him, then sits across from him and sips a cup of coffee. As the boy gulps down his breakfast, Santa tells him how Time nearly stopped last night.

"You didn't turn the glass."

The boy quits chewing. Looking sick, he almost chokes. "I must have—"

"What?"

"Forgot. My gosh, I'm sorry."

"That's not good enough. I trusted you. You gave your word."

"I didn't mean to break it."

"But you broke it all the same."

"I promise. I'll try harder."

"No, do more than try. Today's the first of March. You're not a child now. You're sixteen. You have to do your duty. No excuses, no apologies. You have to be a man."

"I'll never let you down again."

"I hope. There's something I must tell you. I've been waiting till you're old enough to understand."

"What is it?"

Santa tells the boy about the hundred years—how this is Santa's final year and how he soon must journey south to find a brand-new Santa. "While I'm gone, I'm not sure I can trust you here alone to do your job. You might forget again,

and then there won't be any world or brand-new Santa. Everything will end. Because you're not responsible."

"I promise."

"Keep your promise. Please don't disappoint me. Let the world have another Christmas."

"Then you'll climb that hill?"

"That's right. On Christmas Eve."

"The boy begins to cry. 'I'll miss you.'"

Santa frowns. "There's something else I have to tell you. Six days later, New Year's Eve, another baby takes your place. Like me, you have to climb that hill."

"You mean . . . ? I live *only* for a year?"

"That's right."

"I'm *scared*."

"An insect called the mayfly lives only for a day. That's all the time it knows, but for that mayfly, one day has to be enough. For you, one year must be enough. It's not a hundred years, but everything is relative. In my hundred years, I've seen a hundred times more sadness than you'll know."

"You've also seen a hundred times more happiness."

"But in the world, they have a saying. *Grant me the wisdom to change what I can change and to accept what I must accept.* What matters isn't how long we live but how we use the time we have. In your case, Time itself is your responsibility. It's why you're here. You have to do your duty. Be a man."

"Does Father Time forget again?"

"He keeps his word. But Santa watches him. He checks the glass each night to make sure Father Time remembers. Soon the boy turns twenty. By the end of March, he's twenty-four. He's tall and strong and handsome. Though he wants to play, he does the heavy work for Santa. He

helps out—he's useful. Truly he's a man now. But he laughs less. He looks worried. Santa hates to see this change in him. He notices how Father Time spends many hours frowning at the draining sand inside the glass. Then spring comes, and the snow begins to melt. One evening, Santa goes to him and says, 'Tomorrow is the first of May. I have to start my journey. I don't know how long I'll be.' And Father Time replies, 'However long you need. I won't forget to turn the glass. Good luck.' But Santa only answers, *'Pray.'*"

"For what?"

"For wisdom. Santa has his own responsibility. Suppose he picks the wrong man to replace him. What would happen if the brand-new Santa didn't like the job and didn't care enough to make each Christmas special? Think of all the boys and girls who'd wake up Christmas morning and find nothing under the tree. Imagine all the disappointment."

"Gosh, I didn't realize."

"Sure, we depend on Santa, but we never think he'd let us down. We take his generosity for granted. What if he was lazy and unloving, though? Or what if he got lonely for his friends back in the world? Suppose he quit the job?"

"But he can't do that."

"Yes, he can. No one forces him to keep the job. He has to want to keep it. If he ever decides to go back to the world, all he has to do is journey south and stay there."

"Who'd be Santa then?"

"Well, if he didn't take the time to find another Santa, then there wouldn't be one. And in fact, that almost happened. Many years ago. But the Santa I'm telling you about, he doesn't quit. He keeps the job and prays for guidance as he journeys south for his replacement."

"Does he use his sled and reindeer?"

"Not in May. There won't be snow. Besides, he only needs the sled to carry all the presents when it's Christmas. On this search, he goes alone. He knows he'd draw attention in his Santa suit. He takes it off and puts on clothes that won't look strange. A jacket and a tie seem too darn formal. But he figures he'll fit in if he wears jogging clothes. A lot of people wear them. Santa guesses he'll look normal. Then he shuts his eyes and concentrates. Inside his mind, he sees a park that's in the middle of a giant city. Huge high buildings soar around the park. He sees a lake and paths and many trees, people riding bikes or jogging. It's a sunny day. As Santa concentrates, he feels the warm spring air. And poof! He disappears. He hears a roaring wind. And then the far-off blare of traffic and the nearby song of birds, the whir of bikes, the rush of joggers. He decides to look. Of course, he's in the park."

"I bet it's *Central* Park."

"Exactly. Someone almost hits him with a bike. He has to jump away before two joggers knock him over. Sheltered by a tree, he wipes his brow and glances all around. The park is massive. But he barely takes a moment to admire it. He's got a job to do. . . . That evening, Father Time sits in the kitchen when he hears a moan from Santa's bedroom. Going in, he frowns at Santa sprawled across the bed, unconscious, groaning from a nightmare. Santa's jogging suit is torn. His face is bruised. His brow feels warm. He twists at a crumpled newspaper, looking so weary that, instead of waking Santa, Father Time undresses him and covers him with a blanket and holds his hand to soothe him through the night. When Santa wakens, he groans, frightened. Squinting at Father Time, he shivers."

"You look like you've seen a ghost."

"A monster." Santa's face turns pale. He tries to swallow, but his throat won't work.

"Here, drink this glass of water."

Santa drains it in three swallows. Drops roll down his beard. He wipes them. "Thanks. I don't know what I'd do without you."

"You took care of me when I was young. It's my turn now to care for you. What happened?"

Santa shudders. "Everything's changed. The newspaper..."

Santa fumbles around him. "I was sure I brought it with me."

"Here. I found you twisting it as if you wanted to destroy it."

"Did you read it?"

"While I watched you."

"Then you know. The bad things people can do to one another. I wasn't prepared."

"The world was different when you lived there? Long ago, a hundred years, before you came here to be Santa?"

"*Very* different. But at Christmas, I've always been too busy to notice the changes. I don't understand what happened. Things have gotten worse. The world seems smaller, faster, louder. Everything's gray. The people all look desperate. New inventions should have made the world content. Instead they've made the world less satisfied. The wars are worse. I'm frightened. Something bad is going to happen."

"Then you might not find another Santa?"

"I don't know. There must be someone. Somewhere there must be a person worthy to be Santa."

"You need rest."

"It's almost June. I should have started looking earlier."

"You still have many days. A hundred years have tired you. You need your strength. I'll cook some soup."

"I couldn't eat it."

"Try? For me?"

"... I'd do anything."

"Does Santa get his strength back?"

"Father Time takes care of him. Indeed it seems that Santa's a baby now and Father Time is actually a father. Santa soon gets well enough to search again for his replacement. He goes everywhere, to all the different countries, all the cities in the world. No matter where he goes, he can't find anyone to take the job. The people don't have faith. They don't believe in Christmas spirit. They're not generous. Through June, July, and August, Santa searches. Father Time grows older. Soon he's forty-eight, then sixty-four. October comes. He's eighty, with his long white beard, his long gray robe, his wrinkled cheeks and glowing eyes, his scythe. But Santa hasn't been successful. Christmas will arrive, and there'll be no one to deliver presents."

"What about the elves?"

"Yes, Santa's helpers. Two feet tall with pointed ears and turned-up noses. In a workshop close to Santa's house, they make the toys that Santa gives on Christmas. But the elves can't work without him. They need Santa's guidance. In November, when he comes back from another unsuccessful search, the elves explain to him why he can't go away again. The toys aren't ready. Everything's disorganized. If Santa doesn't stay to help, there won't be any presents for a brand-new Santa to deliver. Santa frowns. He goes to Father Time to seek advice."

"You've got a problem, all right." Father time looks older every moment. "If you go away to search for your replacement, you can't stay to prepare for Christmas. If you

stay to prepare for Christmas, you can't go away to search for your replacement. Even you can't do two things at once, and yet you have to do them both."

"I need your help. Your wisdom."

"Time's your problem. You don't have enough of it."

"But even you can't give me more of it."

"That's true. I guard Time. I can't lengthen it. I can't create it. Christmas Eve, you have to climb that hill. Have you forgotten, though? At Christmas, people act their best."

"I don't know what you mean."

"Do one job, then the other. First, prepare for Christmas. After, when you've got the presents ready, use your last few days to search for your replacement. Since the people act their best at Christmas, you in turn will have your best chance to find someone to replace you."

Santa smiles. "I understand. Yes, I'll work extra hard to make the presents. If I find another Santa, this'll be the greatest Christmas of them all. The best. The finest. People will remember it forever. And if . . ."

"Yes? Go on."

"And if I'm not successful in my search, the presents will be wasted. There'll be no one to deliver them. There won't be any Christmas."

"No! There has to be a Christmas!"

"Through November, Santa and his elves work night and day. They stack the shelves with toys. They paint the sled. They brush the reindeer, tying jingly bells around their necks. The reindeer tremble. Everything is ready. Santa doesn't bother changing clothes. December twentieth. A few more days. He shuts his eyes. He concentrates. And poof! Again he disappears."

"But will tomorrow be another Christmas?"

"Listen as the story ends. The last days before

Christmas Eve go quickly. Father Time waits anxiously. Each night, he turns the glass. He sits before the fireplace and worries. Three more days. Then two more days. Then one. What's keeping Santa? What's gone wrong? December twenty-fourth arrives. The sun comes up. It passes through the sky and starts to set. But still no Santa. Something awful must have happened. Father Time peers out the window toward the last rays of the sun. It's Christmas Eve, and there's no Santa. Darkness thickens. Father Time stops hoping. All at once, the air begins to crackle. The room gets bright, and poof! Abruptly Santa reappears, alone, collapsing in the rocking chair. 'I tried my best. I failed. I couldn't find another Santa.'"

"No! You mean tomorrow won't be Christmas?"

"Wait, and you'll find out. You see, what Santa discovered is that people like receiving more than giving. Everybody said, 'A hundred years as Santa? What do *I* get in return?' And Santa answered, 'You receive the joy of giving.' But that answer wasn't good enough. The people snorted and complained about the hard work that they'd have to do for others. 'Everybody benefits but us,' they said. 'Let someone else be Santa. We don't want to lose our presents.'"

"If he came to me, I'd take the job."

"I wonder. Think about it. No more presents for you."

"Gosh, you're right. I didn't think. I don't know what I'd do if I was asked. If everybody felt that way, there wouldn't be a Christmas. Dad, that's awful."

Santa can't wait any longer. Wearily he stands to take his walk.

"But," Father Time says, "if you leave, tomorrow won't be Christmas. Stay."

"I can't. The rule is clear. No matter what, I have to climb that hill. I told you—no excuses, no exceptions."

"It's not you who failed."

"What is it then?"

"The other way around. The world failed you. It failed itself."

"I couldn't make it understand. The world failed, but I failed as well. It's time to go. For me, the end of time."

They sadly leave the house. They face the darkness.

Santa stops. "There's something I forgot." He goes back in the house, returning with a bag of toys. "I don't know what I'll find inside the mist. There might be someone who deserves these presents."

Sobbing, they walk toward the hill—an old man in a gray robe with a scythe across his shoulder, and another old man in a red suit with a sack of toys across his shoulder. Santa's reindeer watch them leave. They feel the sadness, and they frown. The night is cold. The snow lies deep beside the path. A fir tree stands alert, its branches spread as if in blessing. Through the dark, the old men reach the hill. The mist glows brilliantly. It waits.

"I should feel frightened," Santa says. "Instead I'm disappointed that I didn't do my job. After all the other Santas, I'm the one who ended Christmas."

"Are you sure you can't turn back?"

"I'm late already. Friend and son, I'll miss you."

"I'll miss *you*."

As tears roll down their cheeks, they kiss each other. Santa climbs the hill. It's steep. He gasps for breath. Regardless, he plods higher, sad, the final Santa and the end of Christmas.

At the top, he rests. The mist glows brighter, close

before him. Glancing toward the bottom of the hill, he takes his final look at Father Time. If only there was someone . . .

"You!" he shouts to Father Time.

"What is it?"

"*You* can give the presents!"

"I'm not Santa."

"It doesn't matter! There's no rule against it! Who says only Santa can give presents? What's important is that *someone* does! The world can have this final Christmas! Take my place!"

"But how?"

"The reindeer know the way! If you try hard—with love—you can't go wrong! A special gift to everyone! Another Christmas! Please? For me?"

". . . I'd do anything."

Abruptly Santa feels the warmth of happiness flow through him. With a sigh, he smiles and turns to face the mist. He's ready. There won't be another Santa, and in years to come, there won't be other Christmases. But *this* year . . .

He steps forward, blinded by the mist.

From the bottom, Father Time stares up. He sees his friend and father disappearing. First he can't see Santa's boots and pants, and then he can't see Santa's coat. At last, he only sees that bulging sack of toys and Santa's long red tassel cap.

Father Time frowns.

Why has Santa stopped? The mist surrounds him, but his head and shoulders are still visible.

Now Santa turns this way, and Father Time feels stunned by the smile on Santa's face, a smile more brilliant than the mist. Santa's eyes are radiant as if what waits in the mist is overwhelming—wonderful and beautiful. He

lifts an arm to wave farewell. With joy, he turns to face the mist once more. He takes a step.

And he is gone.

"Did Santa go to heaven?"

"You could say that."

"Is he happy there?"

"Completely. After all his years of giving, he received the happiness he wished for others."

"And does Father Time do what he promised?"

"He runs to the house and turns the time-glass. Then he quickly hitches the reindeer to the sleigh. He sets the bag of toys in back. He scrambles in and grabs the reins. The bells on the reindeer jingle. 'Dasher! Dancer! Prancer! Vixen! Comet! Cupid! Donder! Blitzen!' As he shouts each name, the reindeer tug. The sleigh begins to move. The reindeer pull it harder, and the sleigh streaks through the snow. Its blades hiss. Snow flies. Suddenly the sleigh takes off. Eight reindeer and an old man form a silhouette against the winter moon. Abruptly they zoom high out of sight."

"He took just one bag of toys. That's not enough."

"The bag is never empty. It holds every toy that Santa and his helpers made. When Father Time takes out one toy, another toy will fill its place."

"But how can Father Time reach every home before the children wake on Christmas Day? The night's too short."

"But like the bag of toys, it always seems to last. In every home, in each apartment and each house, wherever there are people, Father Time leaps from the sleigh and hurries with his bag of toys."

"He really goes down chimneys?"

"Sometimes. Or else doors and windows open for him."

Sometimes he just walks through walls. He realizes that on Christmas Eve he can do anything."

"And doesn't anybody see him?"

"No. Children fall asleep when he arrives. On rare occasions, parents see him, but their minds get clouded, and they don't remember seeing him. A night of miracles. Of wonders. He brings more than toys. He brings the Christmas spirit. People wake, and they feel joyous. Fathers who have been away come home. And mothers who've been sick get better. Everyone feels loved. On Christmas morning, church bells ring their message—peace, goodwill to everyone. That Christmas is the greatest. Truly extra special. Father Time works harder than he ever dreamed. He's more successful than he ever hoped. The sun comes up. The reindeer bring him home. He leans back in the sleigh and sighs, exhausted. But then he smiles, and then he laughs. Because, although the world is far away, he still can hear the joyful echo of the people laughing and the church bells ringing merrily. Those distant sounds of happiness are his reward. He frees the reindeer from the sleigh. He pets and brushes them. He gives them lots of fresh sweet hay. They kick their hooves and frolic in the snow. At last, he rests. And then remembers he's alone. Six short days go by. On New Year's Eve, he turns the glass. The final time. He stays until the sun has almost disappeared. He takes his last look at the house, then walks along the path, and climbs the hill."

"But wait. When Father Time is gone—"

"The New Year's Baby will arrive."

"Who will watch the baby?"

"No one."

"Who will turn the time-glass?"

"No one. When the sand stops draining—"

"Time will stop? The world will end?"

"Because people wanted to receive instead of give.

Because nobody cared enough, was generous enough, to want to be the brand-new Santa."

"They'll be sorry now."

"But Father Time feels awful. As he climbs the hill, he wishes his old friend were back. He weeps, not for himself but for the world. If people understood. If people had another chance. He pauses on the hilltop, squinting toward the mist. He wants to stay, to save the world. He hears the New Year's Baby crying in the house. He almost turns to go to it. But rules are rules. They can't be broken. That's the lesson Santa taught him. Wincing as the baby cries, he forces himself to step ahead. The mist waits, flashing. But if only . . . Suddenly he feels a blinding burst of heat. He's fat. He wears a red suit. And a tassel cap. He's—"

"Santa!"

"*'Go,'* a voice booms from the mist. *'Despite temptation, you obeyed the rule. You're worthy. Give the world this priceless gift, although the world does not deserve the gift. A hundred years of Christmas. And the time to learn to love.'* The mist goes silent once again. The brand-new Santa weeps with gratitude. His heart swells, filled with thanks. He turns and walks back down the hall. The New Year's Baby cries much harder. But there's someone to watch over him. And someone to watch over Time, to turn the glass, to make the sand keep draining. Santa laughs with joy. He starts to run."

"Tomorrow is another Christmas?"

"Now. Today. It's after midnight. Gosh, I don't know where the time went. You two better get some sleep."

"But I was hoping I'd see Santa."

"You remember what I told you? If by chance you catch a glimpse of him, he'll cloud your mind. You won't know that you've seen him. Hey, the snow has stopped. The wind is gone. Tomorrow will be perfect."

"A white Christmas."

"The beginning of another hundred years. I hope the world makes use of Santa's gift. I hope it learns to love. A kiss for you. And one for you. I'll see you in the morning."

"Merry Christmas."

"And to you. The best. We're all together. What more could we want? Yes, Merry Christmas."